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ABSTRACT

The Rural School Consortium for Educational Leadership and Reform was formed by four rural Indiana school districts in 1991 to coordinate resources for providing staff development that would support reform and restructuring efforts. In the first consortium-sponsored activity, teachers, administrators, support staff, board members, and parents attended four institutes that explained how the brain learns, reviewed effective teaching strategies, and challenged staff to be supportive of brain-compatible learning. Expenses were defrayed by opening the training up to other schools on a fee basis. The success of these institutes gained recognition for the consortium and helped secure further funding from public and private sources. A training institute for school board members and administrators, followed by one for teachers and parents, culminated in the formation of individualized belief and goal statements that became the focal point of each school district's reform efforts. A planning grant was used to examine a set of seven questions related to staff development and school district collaboration; results were subsequently presented to the National Staff Development Conference. The seven questions, with responses, are presented, along with a discussion of the importance of engaging school board members and providing ongoing board training as new members are elected. These efforts have resulted in increased teacher innovations in methods, materials, and technologies; increased collaboration within buildings; and continued contact with teachers from other districts. (TD)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF YOUR RURAL COMMUNITY AND STUDENTS

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In a casual and mostly chance meeting, in today's parlance termed networking, four superintendents from contiguous, basically rural Indiana school districts met for lunch. Having just attended the May 1991 spring superintendent conference on learning and restructuring; the conversation naturally focused on the morning program and the desire among the superintendents to improve the quality of instruction that was being delivered in their respective districts. There was one major difference, however, that on this spring morning, the conversation had created enough positive energy that the thoughts and ideas did not fade with the dessert and the end of lunch. Meetings were scheduled to get down to business.

As the conversations continued in subsequent meetings, four basic themes emerged. There was a definite dissatisfaction with the status quo, and the superintendents were ready to admit that significant improvements were needed, and that in the position of superintendent lay tremendous leadership opportunity. Further, the core or focus of reform efforts and school restructuring must be the achievement of ALL students, the achievement in a curriculum that is performance based and supported by reliable research. Failure of a significant percentage of the student groups could no longer be accepted. This meant that new teaching methods and materials, new paradigms, had to be introduced to ensure that every student was engaged in the learning process and was ultimately learning something of significance.

The third point of agreement came directly from the above. Any meaningful restructuring and reform must be embraced by the classroom teachers or it will fail. The preference was that teachers not only embrace the ideas of others, but instead, are the generators of the reform ideas and ideals. There was a strong belief that boards and

superintendents need to learn how to help teachers grow throughout their professional career. Just as in any organization trying to increase its productivity, a school has no greater potential than the minds and spirits of the human beings who work there. Educational reform without faculty renewal is a dead issue. (James)

The fourth area of agreement followed. As small districts, none had resources in the budget to conduct a tightly conceptualized staff development program that would be needed to carry out the meaningful restructuring that was being talked about. The four superintendents had come to the roadblock that seemed to frustrate educators and halt many good ideas that have potential to bring true reform and improvement to education—lack of money. With approximately 85% of the local budget being used for salaries and fringe benefits and the remaining 15% being strained and already allocated to the other items necessary to keep a school corporation running, there was little money remaining for the local school district to address staff development and curriculum issues.

Following the advice from Drucker, "change what you know or change the conditions under which you work", we decided to explore the idea of forming a consortium to address both our knowledge base and the conditions of the work environment. The traditional or common response by Indiana school district personnel, as is probably due around the nation, is to fly solo and work within the confines of a single district's resources to support change efforts. It was our belief that a loosely knit Consortium would dramatically increase our resources and at time same time, increase the opportunity to locate private dollars to help finance the Herculean staff development efforts that were critical to changing educational practices. The bottom line was that all of

us together could provide programs that no one district alone could even seriously consider.

Thus, the Rural School Consortium for Educational Leadership and Reform was created. The mission was to coordinate resources in order to provide ongoing and systematic professional development opportunities for ALL staff to the end of preparing each local school with adequate and appropriate training to organize the curriculum and instructional delivery system around the tenets of best educational practice.

The ensuing summer was spent on three basic activities. Meetings were held in the individual school districts with board members, administrators, and teacher leaders to explain, refine, and gain support for the consortium concept. The superintendents sought financing from private businesses and foundations to help fund the proposed Consortium activities. Planning was initiated for the first major Consortium staff development program in the fall.

Support from each local district was enthusiastic. A meeting was held with representative groups from each district on June 3, 1991, to hear a presentation from Martha Kaufeldt, an associate of Susan Kovalic, for a possible staff development program for the fall. It was felt that an initial activity by the Consortium would be designed to serve two purposes. First, it would provide some limited data to the superintendents as to how to plan joint projects, specifically the degree of staff receptivity. Second, it would provide an example to possible funding sources (private and state) of what could be accomplished using the Consortium model of pooled expertise and dollars.

In September 1991, four one-day institutes were held on four different days. This made it possible to permit maximum attendance of staff from the four districts without

total disruption at the school site. Multiple options for attendance was an obvious benefit to all. The institutes were designed to explain the latest in research on how the brain learns, to give an overview of effective teaching strategies, and how to challenge all school staff to be supportive of brain compatible learning.

The institutes were attended by 476 teachers, administrators, support staff, board members, and parents from the Consortium schools. To help defray the expenses for the institutes, this training was also opened to other school corporations on a fee basis. One hundred additional educators in central Indiana attended through this provision.

In October, a second series of institutes was designed to build upon the learnings introduced in September. This one-day institute was again repeated for four days so that all teachers who desired the training could attend. Four hundred fifty-three teachers voluntarily attended the training with 166 coming from school districts outside the Consortium.

A November series was scheduled for teachers who were now ready to implement program changes during the second semester of that current school year. Two hundred and seven Consortium teachers and forty-five teachers from outside districts attended. This outside attendance was now a serendipitous benefit to the total staff development program. The fees raised from outside district participants were over $15,000 and helped defray a large percentage of the costs to Consortium school districts. But, as importantly, the Consortium was getting recognition for the high quality institutes by both friends and critics of education.

It is an understatement to say that this fall staff development program was enthusiastically received by the staff of the four Consortium schools. The interaction

between staff members from the various districts during the institutes and the resultant written evaluations of each institute encouraged the four superintendents. The Consortium was a positive, affordable approach to staff development. Efforts to secure more financial backing to fund the mission of the Consortium were significantly increased.

During the next few months, contacts were made with the Indiana Department of Education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the governor's educational liaison, and the Indiana Secretary of State. Contacts were also made with business CEOs and foundations known for their support of public education.

It was encouraging that all of the above mentioned groups expressed interest in the Consortium and its mission. Permission was given to use names as support and in most instances, other contacts were arranged with people who might be able to help financially. After several months of face-to-face contacts, the Consortium received funding from two sources for two distinct components essential to its mission.

The first grant came from Public Service Indiana (PSI). Jim Rogers, CEO of PSI Energy, was very interested in the goals of the Consortium and the potential impact on public education. He was most interested in the governance issues surrounding school reform. From his private sector experience, he reasoned that in order for the employees to feel free to suggest and initiate necessary reforms that there had to be understanding and commitment from the board of directors and the chief executive officer of the organization. Through his encouragement, funds were made available for a training institute designed exclusively for school board members and administrators from each of the Consortium school districts.

The two-day institute was held at an Indianapolis hotel on July 13 and 14, 1992. The retreat was opened with introductory remarks from Mr. Rogers concerning the link between business and education and an encouragement for all concerned to work together to improve education.

The major portion of this institute was conducted by Dr. Phil Schlechty, founder of the Center for Leadership in School Reform located in Louisville, Kentucky. In the first day of the retreat, he helped those assembled understand the history of public education, how we arrived where we are today, and possible directions for the future. Time was afforded for interaction among board members and administrators from the four school districts.

On the second day, each school district team met to work with a facilitator provided by PSI Energy to begin the process of defining beliefs and goals for the district. The Consortium leaders had recognized from the beginning that while each district was very similar in many ways, there were still certain peculiarities in each district which would require adaptation of "lessons learned" to that particular school district. It was recognized that one of the mistakes made in school reform is the assumption that something that works in school district A can be transferred lock, stock, and barrel to school district B. It will look and work the same. While the Consortium would provide each of the districts with partners in learning and the ability to examine solutions to problems without trying to reinvent the wheel, there was recognition up front that individualization of programs would be needed. This was viewed as a strength of the partnership and not a weakness.

A follow-up meeting was held on October 16, 1992. This meeting was expanded to include key teachers and parents. The pre-lunch portion of the meeting was presented

by one of Dr. Schlechty's associates. The purpose of this session was to offer the new members the same background that the board members and administrators were provided as they began their work on belief statements and goals. The afternoon session was spent with facilitators reviewing and enhancing the work that had been done at the July retreat, now using an expanded group of teachers and parents.

Each of the Consortium school districts had by this time officially adopted belief statements. Though they are very similar from one district to another, the individualization and extensive discussions over many months certainly precluded their being boilerplate and sterile platitudes. These belief statements became the focal point for the reform efforts, and they now undergird the extensive curriculum work in the four school districts.

The involvement of the board and administration at the initiation of the reform effort was critical. The common understandings of the larger picture of educational reform made possible in the summer retreat were of immense value. This background knowledge gave a degree of comfort as the school districts began to question the status quo and to examine new programs and concepts. The need for changes and the reasons for supporting such change were less frightening to those who would have the responsibility for authorizing and supporting such efforts.

The opportunity to interact with others in similar positions in similar school districts was most beneficial. Opportunities were given to see educational concerns from more than just the local, sometimes rather narrow point of view. The ability to interact with others who had the same concerns but were not tied to the same district politically or emotionally made it possible to see things from a new vantage, perhaps in a more objective

way. A network was also established which would make cooperation between districts in the Consortium easier.

As discussed earlier, lack of funds is frequently offered as rationale for lack of progress in most educational initiatives. The superintendents were determined to garner the resources and never give nor accept excuses for lack of progress. The Consortium was awarded a $48,000 planning grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. to explore the staff development component of the Consortium mission. In particular, the grant was to be used to examine the following seven extremely significant questions:

1. How could district superintendents most effectively collaborate to maximize the dollars for professional development?
2. What non-monetary benefits would accrue (e.g., climate in workplace) from the collaborative efforts of four small rural districts?
3. How would the mixing of staff from the four districts for professional development enhance or hinder positive changes in curriculum design and instructional delivery?
4. What would a staff development program that was designed to include 100% of the staff in a school district look like? (What percent should be on the job?) (Who are the gurus?) (Who are the coaches?)
5. How does one design a staff development program that maximizes opportunities for teachers to create knowledge, a creation that can only result when teachers examine their own instructional practices and integrate new information?
6. What are the most effective means for initiating the collaboration with community, specifically the private business sector and the social support agencies?

7. How can the policy making bodies (local school boards) function to prepare for and sustain significant and substantive changes in the educational programs?

To address these questions, a steering committee was formed consisting of the superintendent, a board member, administrator, teacher, and parent from each Consortium school district. Each district also established a larger steering committee to oversee the activities of the planning grant. Funds were used to provide institutes on Effective Teaching Strategies, Whole Language, and Middle School Curriculum Integration. Staff members from the four school districts were sent to the National Staff Development Conference with the seven questions listed above in hand. Meetings of the steering committee were held to assess and evaluate each activity in the light of the seven examination questions.

The following highlights the responses to the grant questions:

1. How could district superintendents most effectively collaborate to maximize the dollars for professional development?

- It was determined that it is not only more cost effective to collaborate but that the sharing has proven that many of the needs of professional development can be met within the expanded group.

- The sharing of financial resources allowed the four school districts to contract with nationally recognized educational leaders for specific staff development activities that would have been almost impossible for one district alone.

- The collaboration proved so advantageous that the superintendents were motivated to expand the collaboration to business and community groups.

2. *What non-monetary benefits would accrue (e.g., climate in workplace) from the collaborative efforts of four small rural districts?*

- There were opportunities for staff to collaborate and plan new and exciting programs for students.

- A variety of staff development opportunities inspired teachers to broaden their thinking and planning into unchartered areas of expanded and sound educational programs-e.g. block scheduling, multiage grouping, action research.

- Staff attitudes about teaching and learning changed. Many teachers have received "new life" and are dedicated to improving methods and curriculum to meet the challenges of today's students. Teachers were seen in attendance at discussion groups about teaching and learning that here-to-fore were only in attendance at retirement planning institutes.

3. *How would mixing of the staff from the four districts for professional development enhance or hinder positive changes in curriculum design and instructional delivery?*

- In-depth discussions about teaching and learning were overheard in every nook and cranny. The thought-provoking, professional discussions would not have been possible with only the staff members from a single building who shared a common, more narrow background and mind-set.

- The evaluations from staff members were overwhelmingly positive about the opportunities presented to collaborate with professionals from other schools.

4. *What would a staff development program that was designed to include 100% of the staff in a school district look like? (What percent should be on the job?) (Who are the gurus?) (Who are the coaches?)*

- The staff development design must blend the organizational needs with a process for personal growth for teachers and other staff members.

- While each district customized the model to fit the level of conceptualization of district staff, there were some commonalties: each identified a "district cadre" from their teacher and administrative ranks to be trained; a plan to ensure the "district cadre" persons work with the remainder of the staff; staff development sessions were to be organized around adult learning theory.

- Effective staff development included the presentation of the theory; modeling or demonstration of skills or models of teaching; opportunity for practice in real or simulated classrooms; feedback on performance that was structured, yet open-ended; and time for reflection and planning was provided.

5. *How does one design a staff development program that maximizes opportunities for teachers to create knowledge, a creation that can only result when teachers examine their own instructional practices and integrate new information?*

- There needs to be a major shift in staff development program design for a specific group of teachers who are asking tough questions about teaching and learning and are ready to look within their own classrooms for answers.

- There needs to be support for teachers in what is typically described as action research or teachers as researchers.

- Consultants or indistrict experts must be identified who can coach and collaborate with teachers on practical research design.

- The ability to discuss their own classroom with persons from outside the building enhances the reflective ability of the classroom teachers.

6. *What are the most effective means for initiating the collaboration with community, specifically the private business sector and the social support agencies?*

- Representatives from segments of the community should be included on planning teams that define the results intended from the effort.

- The use of facilitators for discussion groups from the business sector enhances the communication between school and business.

- "Town meetings" with full participation of the community to discuss needs, plans, and programs add to the feeling of ownership in the schools, but caution is given to structuring in such a way that all in attendance be given an opportunity to participate.

7. *How can the policy making bodies (local school boards) function to prepare for and sustain significant and substantive changes in the educational program?*

- School boards must be given sufficient background information to realize that there is a need for change.

- School boards must develop a common core of beliefs that can serve as the basis for policy development in the districts. This core should include beliefs about the role of the board itself and its responsibility for the educational programs as well as the role of superintendent, principal, teachers, parents, and the community.

- School boards need to make policy decisions that will ensure students, parents, staff, and patrons work toward the attainment of the common beliefs.

- School boards need to adopt a decision making model that filters the single and narrow agendas of individual members.

- School governance is at a cross roads. Change efforts are constantly redirected as members of the local boards change. It is imperative that training for board members be ongoing.

The experience of the superintendents who formed the Consortium continues to be very positive. Every opportunity is explored to pool resources and to collaborate in numerous staff development options. The sharing of expertise of superintendents and by teachers among the districts has the potential for being the major asset of the Consortium arrangement. The ability to approach the private sector for grants and funding for particular programs has been much more effective due to the collaboration and the "bang for the bucks". The foundations/endowments dollars are now having widespread impact.

It is also obvious that in small districts where the superintendent has little or no central office staff, the time requirements to deal with all the tasks that face a school district leave less than adequate time to address the needs of human resource development, curriculum review, and instructional delivery. While the Consortium greatly helps to fill gaps in this area, it will continually be a problem that must be addressed.

The engaging of Boards of Education from each district in the discussion as to how their role as educational policy makers is vital to the improvement of the education programs was highly effective. A change in attitude and behavior in board members was noted. The boards began to define their role as the communicator and promoter of the district's vision to the community - not just as the overseer of the taxpayer interest. However, with new board members coming and going with each election, it became

obvious within the first year of the Consortium work that *intensive board training* that far exceeds the training now evident in districts around the nation must become the modus operandi or much of the effort expended by school superintendents, principals, and teachers will be short lived and will cause only minor, short-lived changes in the way schooling is conceptualized.

The staff in each district has continued to grow. There is an ongoing examination of practices in the classroom and especially, a closer look at how to build on strengths and obviate weaknesses that have long existed. Many teachers are trying new methods, new ways of allocating or chunking time, new roles of staff, use of materials, technology, and other means to improve the quality of education in their individual classrooms. There is more collaboration within buildings as well as continued contact with teachers from the other districts. The contact has been maintained through the 95-96 school year as teachers from each of the districts participated in the Academy of Leadership. This is a second partnership that extended the influence of the Consortium to East Central Education Service Center.

While we cannot say that we have all the answers to school reform, we do feel that we have discovered at least one path that is leading to an increase in knowledge about teaching and learning in the four small school districts. It is our belief that as we continue the path of expanding our knowledge and increasing our cooperation, we will, in fact, be improving what is happening every day in the classroom for students. If the poet was correct when he penned "no man is an island . . .", then certainly that is true of school districts.

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